

This document outlines principles and guidelines for restarting clinical research across the University of Pittsburgh. The goal is to provide a broad and consistent structure for departments, institutes, and centers within the School of Medicine to engage in reopening human subjects research.

PRINCIPLES

1. The safety of our patients and participants in human subjects research and clinical trials, the members of the University community, and the larger Allegheny County population is of paramount importance.
2. Planning should be grounded in science and guidance from the CDC and UPMC Wolff Center regarding both best laboratory practices with infectious agents and specific information of the characteristics of SARS-CoV-2 and its observed manifestations within the Pittsburgh community.
3. Clinical research is an essential function of the University of Pittsburgh and the results of research are of great value to society. It is noted that the impact of non-COVID-19 related diseases that have been neglected are expected to manifest and will require access to potentially life-saving new experimental therapies.
4. The careers and livelihoods of many faculty, staff, students, and others at the University depend on the ability to continue ongoing, and initiate new, research activities.

Observations and Data:

1. Allegheny county has shown a relatively low level of SARS-Cov-2 impact compared to many other areas within the United States; the case load is low and based on all available data from UPMC sites in Allegheny county the curve of new cases has now flattened and appears to be dropping. Information from UPMC indicates that the majority of cases within Allegheny county are occurring within nursing homes and other senior communities.
2. Because of the low number of COVID-19 hospitalizations in Allegheny County, the still limited understanding of the implications of positive or negative test results to the spread of the virus, and limitations on the availability of reagents for testing, *widespread testing of members of the University of Pittsburgh community is unlikely to be possible* in the planning for the restarting of research activities. Instead, testing resources should be directed toward individuals with symptoms or other factors that lead to a substantially higher-than-average suspicion of SARS-CoV-2 infection.
3. Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 occurs primarily through dispersion of droplets containing the virus. This observation indicates that effective transmission prevention can be based on (a) physical distance between individuals of 6 or more feet; (b) frequent and thorough handwashing and surface cleaning and other good hygiene practices; and (c) the use of surgical masks or the equivalent to decrease the amount of potentially infectious materials being spread from infected individuals.

GUIDELINES

The guidelines below outline how Pitt personnel engaged in human subjects research (1) operate within Pitt research buildings and (2) interact with human subject participants within Pitt research buildings or the community setting. Any human subject research conducted within UPMC space, whether by Pitt personnel or UPMC personnel, is subject to the clinical practice guidelines of UPMC. Accordingly, the impact of case load and severity of COVID-19 patients within UPMC hospitals should not influence decisions regarding the conduct of human subjects research in Pitt research buildings. The rapidly changing environment for best practices in clinical care necessitates the guidelines below function as temporary recommendations subject to regular re-evaluation by the Dean, School of Medicine.

Pitt Research Personnel Engaged in Human Subjects Research

Requirements prior to entering the research environment

1. All work that can be performed remotely should continue to be performed remotely.
2. Vulnerable individuals, including those 65 or older and those with underlying medical conditions (as described by the CDC) that are not well-controlled, are encouraged to continue remote work.
3. Undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral students can return to the research environment within guidelines specified by the University of Pittsburgh and in consultation with their PI, institute director, division chief, or chair.
4. Any individuals who have traveled from an area of the US that remains under stay-at-home orders or who have travelled internationally within the last 14 days, must self-quarantine for 14 days (exemptions possible for personnel with patient care responsibilities who undergo appropriate screening).
5. Research personnel who have tested positive for COVID-19, have been in contact (without appropriate PPE) with someone known to have COVID-19, have been told by a public health official or employer that they may have been exposed to COVID-19 in the past two weeks, or been in contact with anyone showing COVID-19 symptoms (as detailed in #6), must not come to work and contact their supervisor immediately for further instructions.
6. Research personnel who are experiencing symptoms of new shortness of breath, cough, or sore throat within the past few days or have fever, sweating, chills, any loss of taste or smell, muscle aches, nausea, or diarrhea must not come to work and contact their supervisor immediately for further instructions.
7. For personnel returning to research laboratories, a COVID-19 safety-training module must be completed successfully to gain building entry. For essential personnel who currently have access to research buildings they must complete the module by **June 1** to maintain entry rights after **June 2**.

Requirements within the research environment

8. Personnel entering a research facility are subject to any University of Pittsburgh or UPMC screening procedures that are currently in place for specific entrances before being allowed to proceed to their research area.
9. A UPMC provided (in UPMC facilities) or a Pitt provided (in Pitt facilities) earloop face mask must be worn by all research staff and research participants from the time of entry into the building until the time of exit from the building, except while eating with greater than 6ft distancing, or in an enclosed single-person office space. Use of masks is encouraged during the entire commute for personnel taking public transport.
10. Personnel must use swipe card access (where available) to gain building access. All personnel must maintain a personal log of daily entry times and exit times, any 'close contacts' (as defined below; appropriate clinical source documents also acceptable), and confirmation of lack of exposure (#5 above) and symptoms (#6 above) that is checked frequently by the laboratory PI or supervisor.
11. Within the research building environment, a minimum of 6ft physical distancing is required at all times including bathrooms, and breakrooms. Elevators should be limited to 2 or 4 persons at a time wearing face coverings. Flow of foot traffic on a floor should be maintained in one direction where possible. Safeguarding hand washing practices and hand sanitizer use must be observed.

12. A minimum of 6ft physical distancing must be maintained at all times whenever possible. In special work areas where 6ft distancing is not possible, personnel must adopt UPMC Wolff Center guidelines for 'close contact with an asymptomatic patient'* (mask and eye protection; gowns and gloves may be required for specific research procedures).
13. In research space where it is necessary to decrease personnel density to maintain physical distancing, the development of shift work scheduling is strongly encouraged (e.g., three 6-hour shifts or two 8-hour shifts). PIs can determine their own shift schedules. Shift desynchronization with other research groups on the same floor will potentially minimize interaction in hallways and communal areas. Personnel, in consultation with their PI, must agree to specific shift assignments, including weekend activity, and work within contracted weekly hour limits (including any remote work).
14. At the end of any shift period or workday outgoing personnel must wipe all actively used surfaces and equipment with appropriate cleaning or disinfectant materials.
15. In-person meetings in the research environment are strongly discouraged and should be conducted using internet-based platforms as the first option. If there is no alternative to an in-person meeting, a minimum of 6ft physical distancing must be maintained and limited to 10 personnel.
16. Upon notification of a confirmed positive COVID-19 individual, areas where the person has visited in the 48 hrs. before emergence of symptoms, or before notification of a positive test, (whichever is the more recent) must be prepared to close for 24 hrs. and appropriate cleaning and disinfectant procedures undertaken. Any personnel that meet the CDC and UPMC Wolff Center criteria for 'close contact'** with the COVID-19 positive individual must undergo a 14-day quarantine period and test COVID-19 negative and follow Health department procedures before returning to the research environment.
17. In the event of a future surge in cases, the SOM will, if directed, return to an 'essential personnel' and remote work environment.
18. Each PI and/or consolidated research unit (e.g. open lab areas) will be required to complete a provided templated plan/checklist that is approved by the institute director or department chair and then by School of Medicine leadership prior to restarting research. Individual PIs are accountable for the compliance of their personnel in their own research space, in shared laboratory space, and in the research building in general. Institute directors, division chiefs, chairs, and deans are accountable for compliance of all the PIs and laboratories within their appropriate research unit.
19. For the safety of all personnel in the research environment, any individuals, laboratories, or research teams found to be non-compliant in the directives listed above may have badge and facility access revoked and research protocol suspended at the discretion of the institute director, division chief, chair, or dean.

* The following are the required PPE for health care providers who will be coming into close contact (<6ft for >5 minutes) with any patient who is not suspected of being infected with COVID-19.

- Patients should be masked regardless of symptoms
- Health care providers should wear standard surgical mask (not N95) and eye protection only if patient cannot or will not don surgical mask
- Sterile gown (procedures only)
- Sterile gloves (procedures only)

** Note: personnel adhering to guidelines above would minimize the risk of being considered a close contact. *The CDC defines close contact for healthcare exposures as follows: being within approximately 6ft (2 meters) of a person with COVID-19 for a prolonged period of time (such as caring for or visiting the patient; or sitting within 6ft of the patient in a healthcare waiting area or room); or having unprotected direct contact with infectious secretions or excretions of the patient (e.g., being coughed on, touching used tissues with a bare hand). Fifteen minutes is being used by the CDC to define prolonged period of time for community exposures and contact tracing.*

Human Subject Participants Engaged in Non-COVID-19 Research

1. No human subject participant should enter the research environment if the research can be performed remotely.
2. As much research activity as possible should be accomplished remotely (e.g. consent in some situations), even in situations where it is essential for a human subject participant to at some point enter the research environment.
3. Clinical research personnel must confirm a human subject has not traveled from an area of the US that remains under stay-at-home orders, not travelled internationally within the last 14 days, or self-quarantined for a minimum of 14 days after returning from such travel, before they can enter the Pitt/UPMC clinical research environment.
4. PIs must consider the risk to benefit ratio of their research before engaging in human subjects research in vulnerable individuals, including those 65 or older and those with underlying medical conditions (as described by the CDC) that are not well-controlled. Participants in human subjects research should be informed of current best practices to maintain a safe Pitt/UPMC hospital and clinical research environment.
5. Human subject participants entering a research building must undergo any required standard screening, including temperature testing, and be supplied with an earloop face mask.
6. Before and on the day of research participation, the research team must determine if a human subject participant is known COVID-19 positive, exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms, or has had contact with a person known to be COVID-19 positive. If any of these three conditions is applicable, the human subject participant should return home (or stay at home) and contact study coordinator for case management and referral for contact tracing.
7. Within the clinical research environment, human subject participants should maintain a minimum of 6ft physical distancing including elevators and bathrooms. Flow of foot traffic on a floor should be maintained in one direction where possible and human subject participants provided access to hand washing and hand sanitizer facilities.
8. The waiting areas, testing areas, and all interactions with human subject participants require physical distancing and adherence to Wolff Center guidelines for 'close contact with an asymptomatic patient'*.
9. If human subject participants are considered at high risk of having COVID-19 based on contact tracing exposure or symptoms, they must test COVID-19 negative less than 24 hours prior to engaging in human subjects research within the research environment (note: rapid COVID-19 testing on the day of study is acceptable if there is no research personnel and human subject participant interaction prior to confirmation of a negative COVID-19 test).
10. Research in the community setting should occur only if (1) activities cannot be conducted remotely and (2) upon completion of phone screening within 24h of the home visit for COVID-19 risk factors. This screening (by phone or video) should include the same questions regarding travel and symptoms as required with human subject participants in the research environment (recognizing that these screening questions may evolve).
11. Community visits should not occur for any human subject participant who is known COVID-19 positive, has COVID-19 symptoms, or has had contact with a person known to be COVID-19 positive.
12. Human subjects research conducted in a community setting is subject to current state and county regulations and precautions for home visit activities should follow the guidelines listed above and below where applicable.

Research Personnel Interacting with Human Subject Participants

1. Wherever possible, human subjects research should be conducted while observing a minimum of 6ft physical distancing.
2. If physical interaction is required to conduct human subjects research, personnel must adopt Wolff Center guidelines for 'close contact with an asymptomatic patient'* , as described above.
3. Wherever human subject participants interact with equipment, devices, or other surfaces, research personnel must undertake appropriate cleaning or disinfection based on current UPMC guidelines before a new human subject participant can enter the research space.

[https://inonet.upmc.com/BusinessTools/EmergencyPreparedness/Documents/COVID-19 Environmental Services and Linen Action Plan.pdf](https://inonet.upmc.com/BusinessTools/EmergencyPreparedness/Documents/COVID-19%20Environmental%20Services%20and%20Linen%20Action%20Plan.pdf)

Research Personnel Interacting with COVID-19-positive Human Subject Participants Engaged in Research

1. All investigators conducting clinical research (trials, observational, specimen collection) need to register their studies at the CTSI (<https://covid19research.pitt.edu>).
2. In UPMC space or the Pitt research environment, research personnel interacting with COVID-19-positive patients must adhere to airborne-precaution PPE and all current Wolff Center protocols.

Collection of biological specimens from study participants

1. Specimens collected from known or suspected COVID-19 patients must use appropriate PPE for collection. Samples must be handled according to UPMC guidelines and University of Pittsburgh guidelines (<https://www.ehs.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/docs/ResearchBiosafetyGuidelinesCOVID-19.pdf>) and only processed in a BSL2+ or BSL3 facility, depending on planned assays. For all other human subjects specimens, universal precautions should be strictly observed. Specimens should be handled only with gloves and placed in a closed container for transport. Laboratories should follow BSL 2 procedures and specimens handled in a biosafety hood unless inactivated.
2. Specimens should not be acquired by human subject participants from their home if they have tested COVID-19 positive. All other specimen samples should be treated with due care and the assumption that they may be COVID-19 positive.
3. Any procedure that generates aerosols should follow current UPMC clinical guidelines.